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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S COURTESY CALL ON MINISTER OF HAJI AND ISLAMIC AFFAIRS

Classified By: Ambassador Francis Ricciardone; Reasons (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In the Ambassador's January 26 meeting with the new Afghan Minister of Haji and Islamic Affairs (MHIA), Dr. Mohammad Yousef Niazi, they discussed ways the Ministry could promote respect for fundamental human rights, peace, justice, and national unity through Afghanistan's network of some 140,000 mosques, most of which are not directly under the Ministry's control. Highly appreciative of the Ambassadors visit, Niazi expressed his desire for closer relations with the United States and his commitment to draw on Islam to impress upon the Afghan people that it is a religion of peace and Americans are their friends. The Ambassador lauded Niazi's presence when Afghan authorities had inspected his office for evidence against Niazi's predecessor, Sediq Chakari. End Summary.

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Biographical Information
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¶2. (SBU) Mohammad Yousef Niazi was born in 1959 in Nangarhar Province's Kama District. He received his elementary and secondary education from the Betab School and the Imam Abu Hanifa Seminary in Kabul. Niazi went to Saudi Arabia for his higher education, earning a Bachelor's degree in Shari'ah from the Islamic University in Madina. He completed master's and doctorate degrees in Islamic Studies at the Umm Al-Qura University in Mecca, where he also taught in 2001. Niazi served in Afghanistan's embassy in Saudi Arabia from 1996-2000. He was then appointed curriculum advisor to Afghanistan's Education Ministry, where he worked for seven years. Pashtun in origin, Niazi is fluent in Pashto, Dari, and Arabic and is the author of several books. He speaks a little English. (Note: Notwithstanding Niazis' years of Islamic training in Saudi Arabia, when he greeted the female Deputy Political Counselor at the start of the meeting, he extended his hand to shake hers. End Note.)

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Islamic Principles Support Peace, Justice, Human Rights
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¶3. (C) In the Ambassador's courtesy call on Minister Niazi, he congratulated Niazi for his appointment and Parliament's robust support for his confirmation (Niazi received 130 votes in favor, 80 against, 10 abstentions/blanks/spoiled votes, a relatively high approval by a very combative legislature). Attributing his support in Parliament to his ability to "get along with everyone" regardless of ethnic orientation, Niazi thanked the Ambassador for his visit. Unlike some Afghans who did not understand the value of U.S. support, Niazi said he appreciated our assistance and was cognizant that Afghanistan "could not do anything" without U.S. presence. He also thanked the Ambassador and the FAA Director attending the meeting for our assistance to the very successful 2009 Haj. (Note: Last year, over 30,000 Afghans made the

pilgrimage. USAID provided H1N1 vaccines for all the pilgrims as part of an International Travel Vaccine Program for all interested travelers. End Note.)

¶4. (C) Referring to Niazi's extensive training as an Islamic scholar, the Ambassador sought Niazi's views on how we could best help Afghanistan build a legal system that incorporates Afghanistan's Islamic tradition. Appreciative of the Ambassador's interest in this subject, Niazi explained that this subject was among his priorities. During his seven-year tenure as the Ministry of Education's Curriculum Director of Education (2001-2008), Niazi had focused on textbook revisions to emphasize the importance of peace, justice, and respect for human rights so that future generations of Afghans would understand at an early age the importance of these values and that they are compatible with Islamic principles.

Never Forget Someone Who Helps You

¶5. (C) Niazi shared his plans to improve Afghan-U.S. relations and spread the message that Islam is based on peace, justice, and human rights through communications with mullahs serving in Afghanistan's network of 140,000 mosques. Most of these mosques are not directly controlled by the Ministry and, for example, do not have state-supported imams. The MHIA's unique position would allow it to influence Islamic leaders, who in turn, would influence their followers. So far, the Ministry had not used its position to achieve this goal, but Niazi intended to use his good offices to that effect. "The Koran teaches us to respect each

religion and encourages Muslims to live lives of peace and cooperation," he explained. "The Koran also states that "never forget someone who helps you," added Niazi. While he did not expect to eventually use these teachings to influence 100 percent of the Afghan people, perhaps 80 percent would be convinced.

¶6. (C) Niazi said his ministry would write materials and arrange meetings and seminars to spread the word that Islam is a religion of peace, justice, and human rights and that the Americans are here to help Afghanistan. One key segment of the population that needed convincing were the mullahs, many who considered themselves among the opposition. For example, providing 3,000 Afghanis (approximately USD 60) per month to each of Afghanistan's mosques would go a long way to demonstrate support and engender trust.

Help Sought from the U.S. and Muslim Nations

¶7. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's query regarding the Ministry's priorities and needs, Niazi said that in addition to providing modest financial support, the mosques also need audiovisual, computer equipment, and new books that would help mullahs develop a modern approach focusing on love cooperation and trust, explained Niazi. The Ambassador asked whether the Ministry received funds from Arab countries, explaining that U.S. laws restrict financial support to advance any particular religion, regardless of denomination. Further, U.S. aid could be misconstrued as an effort to propagandize and influence Afghanistan's Islamic traditions. Notwithstanding these restrictions, the United States does support initiatives that advance peace, human rights, and justice.

¶8. (C) Niazi said he was aware of U.S. restrictions and that they applied to all faiths. He was working with the Presidency and the Ministry of Interior to obtain funding for his objectives. The Ambassador referred to a common American expression "where there is a will there is a way," adding, "as long as the way does not send us to jail." At the close of the meeting, the Ambassador expressed his desire for further meetings after the Minister had time to settle into

his position. The Ambassador suggested holding a working lunch with Embassy and Ministry officials to define future cooperation opportunities.

¶9. (C) In a pull-aside between the Ambassador and Niazi following the formal meeting, the Ambassador told him he was aware from Afghan law enforcement that Niazi's predecessor had issues with accountability and that he had heard Niazi had been present when Afghan authorities had inspected the office for evidence against his predecessor, Sediq Chakari. Niazi's presence had made the investigation more legitimate and would likely allow the recovered evidence to be used in court explained the Ambassador. The Ambassador said there could be no better ministry than Niazi's to set a "moral example" to the Afghan people. Niazi replied that he lived well during his 26 years in Saudi Arabia and during his seven years back in Afghanistan. Now it was time for him to lead, and the responsibility of a leader was to lead by example by being clean and not allowing corruption. He was currently reviewing his ministry's budget with the assistance of the Ministry of Finance. "When there is zero corruption at the top, then there will be zero corruption at the bottom," he concluded.

Ricciardone